

# SEEKING BYZANTIUM ON THE BORDERS OF NARRATION, IDENTITY, SPACE AND TIME IN JULIA KRISTEVA'S NOVEL *MURDER IN BYZANTIUM*

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Some years ago, I had the opportunity to hear a lecture given by Julia Kristeva, the French-Bulgarian linguist, psychoanalyst, literary scholar and writer, at Stockholm University. She had recently published her fourth novel, *Meurtre à Byzance* (2004), later translated into English as *Murder in Byzantium* (2006). As in the novel, Kristeva placed great emphasis in her lecture on the importance of Orthodox Christianity and the Byzantine legacy for Europe of today, a theme she had also touched upon earlier, in *Crisis of the European Subject* (2000).

By means of a literary analysis, the aim of this article is to shed light on the notion of Byzantium as shaped by Kristeva in *Murder in Byzantium*, and also to address the issue of Byzantium's potential capacities as a multifaceted borderland. My initial aim was to examine how the novel's presentation of many different perceptions of Byzantium can be seen to contribute to a discussion not only of traditionally Orthodox countries such as Bulgaria or Russia, but of all those parts of Europe where Orthodoxy, and thus the traditions of Byzantine culture, are present. Like Byzantium at one time, these regions are often themselves borderlands between Eastern and Western Europe, and between different languages and nationalities. One example is the North Calotte and the Barents region, which the Swedish writer Bengt Pohjanen has described as an interface and a borderland – not between Russia and Norway, but between Byzantium and Rome (Pohjanen 2000: 70-71). Another example of such a region is Karelia, with its many Orthodox Christian believers, on the boundary between Russia and Finland. But, as we shall see, Kristeva's ambition extends much further than this. The potential functions of Byzantium, or of a Byzantine identity, which can be extracted from *Murder in Byzantium*, exceed all previously known expectations and limits, and combine po-

litical thoughts with metaphorical meanings in a very particular, free and associative way.

In spite of its title, *Murder in Byzantium* is not a historical novel, and it does not relate a murder committed in the historical Byzantine Empire. Instead, the novel shapes and discusses Byzantium in terms of transgressions of several conventional borders. The openness of Kristeva's literary shaping and discussion of Byzantium thus stands in sharp contrast to the traditional Western, negative view of Byzantium as corrupted and decadent, offering instead an intriguing and appealing alternative. As one of the reviewers reflects, *Murder in Byzantium* reclaims Byzantium "as Europe's immemorial past: its repressed Oriental self whose legacy is still haunting the present 'problematic Union'" (Margaroni 2007: 224).

Usually, Byzantium is studied as a historical empire, ending in 1453, but since its Orthodox Christian tradition is still active in parts of Europe – in the Orthodox countries of Eastern Europe, as well as in several Western European multilingual and multicultural regions, there are good reasons to extend the traditional range of its study in time as well as in space, to include even later and imaginative perceptions and functions of Byzantium. The general and problematic absence of an understanding of Byzantium in public and political discourse has recently been discussed in detail by the Byzantinist Averil Cameron (2008: 38, 40, 46). In particular, she notes its absence from academic discussions of themes such as ethnicity, identity, multiculturalism, migration and acculturation, and from the current debates on imperialism. As Cameron points out, there is a need to make space in the debate for the actual diversity and complexity of Byzantium (2008: 34, 58). Kristeva's *Murder in Byzantium* forms a personal and interesting contribution to this process, as has been noted by Byzantinists (Cameron 2006: 76-77; Nilsson 2005: 238).

Julia Kristeva came from Bulgaria, from an Orthodox Christian family and tradition (Kristeva 2000: 23), to France in the 1960s, when she was in her twenties. According to Kristeva herself, all of her childhood was bathed in the liturgy of the Orthodox Church (Sutherland). Although she has sometimes been perceived "as flaunting her marginality, as a 'vulgar Bulgar'" (as quoted by Nikolchina 2003: 169), Kristeva continues to describe herself as "a creature of the crossroads"

(2000: 113), or even as “a monster of the crossroads” (2000: 167), or simply, in a later interview, as a foreigner (Huitfeldt 2006: 169). She has also drawn a parallel between her own history and that of the female protagonist of *Murder in Byzantium*, the journalist and detective Stephanie Delacour: “I usually call myself an adopted American Frenchwoman of Bulgarian origin with a European citizenship. That’s quite a lot in one go! It’s a mosaic.” (Huitfeldt 2006: 169) Nor does Kristeva hesitate to call *Murder in Byzantium* her most autobiographical novel (Huitfeldt 2006: 176).

### **A total novel**

*Murder in Byzantium* is a rich story, usually categorized as a detective novel, using several story lines and reconciling several plots – romantic, criminal, political and philosophical. It has been characterized as “a total novel” (Huitfeldt 2006: 171), developing a “post-punk energy” (Thorne 2006), and although Kristeva herself has called it an “anti-Da Vinci Code” (Sutherland 2006), one review advises readers to buy it “for the Dan Brown fan in your life” (Thorne 2006). This is a novel which never states its ideas explicitly or treats them in a systematic way. Instead, it gives voice to several different viewpoints, inter-meshing and blending with each other, as one character is often heard to express the view of another, even in contradiction to his or her own opinion.

Santa Varvara, where the first murder takes place, is in this novel a place emblematic of the global village, of which terrorism as well as religious sectarianism are prominent features. Although its name in Kristeva’s French text is Santa-Barbara, it should not be confused with Santa Barbara, California. Two European countries, communicating with Santa Varvara, also appear in the novel, one Western and one Eastern: France and Bulgaria. Both of them prove to contain a Byzantium: France in an applied, metaphorical way, and Bulgaria in a historical, original way.

The murderer is not one, but two different characters. The first murderer is initially an unknown person, who later becomes identified as Xiao Chang or Wuxian, a Chinese. He murders members of a religious sect in Santa Varvara, and one of the names he goes by is “the Purifier”. The second murderer is one of the novel’s main characters, Sebastian Chrest-Jones, an academic conducting research on

migratory history at the University of Santa Varvara, who unexpectedly strangles his assistant, a Chinese woman, who is also his mistress.

After his deed, Chrest-Jones returns to his secret research project, an investigation into the life of the Byzantine princess and the first female historian ever, Anna Comnena, active in Constantinople during the first half of the 12<sup>th</sup> century. This project takes the form of writing a novel, and it prompts him to travel to Bulgaria, to find his own roots. Chrest-Jones' father was a Bulgarian immigrant, and furthermore he imagines that one of the crusaders was his ancestor. At one time in Bulgaria, this crusader might have crossed paths with Anna Comnena, and Chrest-Jones imagines and writes in his novel that the crusader – his possible ancestor – and the Byzantine princess experienced a short but erotically highly charged encounter, after which they never met again.

Both of the murder cases are entrusted to Commissioner Rilsky, who happens to be related to Chrest-Jones through their common ancestor, the Bulgarian immigrant. Soon Rilsky gets assistance from the Parisian reporter Stephanie Delacour, and it does not take long before their cooperation is seen to evolve into an intense love story.

As Kristeva is a conscious linguist, her naming of her characters is undoubtedly not an accident, but rather aims to reveal some of their Bulgarian and Byzantine connections in a playful way. Thus, Commissioner Rilsky's name alludes to the famous Bulgarian Orthodox Rila monastery. Sebastian Chrest-Jones' name combines the first part of a Byzantine imperial title, *sebastokrator*, meaning 'venerable ruler', with a surname betraying a Christian identity, partly by its allusion to the common Slavic word for cross (*krest*), and partly by the possibility of pronouncing Chrest-Jones with a French accent, making it sound like the English word 'Christians'. As for Santa-Barbara, the different forms of its name used in French and English make it plausible that it has been chosen for its allusion not only to a well-known Orthodox saint (mentioned by Kristeva, 2000: 141), but also to the ancient Greek and Byzantine way of referring to all people who did not speak Greek and who did not live in the known world (*oikomene*). They were *the barbarians*; the *b* later softened into a *v* in the Greek and the Slavic languages, as in the name Santa Varvara.

Kristeva is also a conscious literary critic, and as she was one of those who introduced the concept of intertextuality into literary studies, it is not surprising to find that *Murder in Byzantium* heavily relies on two other texts. One is a fictive text, the novel which Chrest-Jones is writing on the life of Anna Comnena, and the other a historical text, the original work of Anna Comnena, called *The Alexiad* – a huge historical work, which describes the reign of Anna's father, the Byzantine Emperor Alexios I. They are both interleaved with the narration voiced by the very talkative Stephanie, who quotes them, discusses them and reads them aloud.

The crossroads of all these different texts, plots and story lines, constituting the novel in interplay with each other, seems to be situated in Byzantium – not in the historical Byzantine Empire, but in 'a Byzantium' as interpreted by the protagonists Sebastian Chrest-Jones and Stephanie Delacour. The definite solution of both of the murder cases takes place in a church built in the Byzantine style in southern France, in Le Puy-en-Velay, where Chrest-Jones eventually goes to complete his Byzantine journey to Bulgaria, following backwards in the footsteps of the crusaders. In this French church, the first murderer, the Purifier, eventually overtakes and shoots the second one, Chrest-Jones, after which the Purifier himself is immediately shot by Stephanie. Her later comment on the sudden death of Chrest-Jones in the church in Le Puy-en-Velay is that he died in "his Byzantium" (2006: 232).

### **Byzantium for Europe?**

In an interview, Julia Kristeva presents an allegorical interpretation of her novel, pointing to the fact that Europe today is challenged on the one hand by globalization led by America, and on the other hand by the Third World, represented by Islamists, as well as by China and India, just as Byzantium was once pressed between Western and Eastern forces. She concludes, "In the past Byzantium tumbled down. Will Europe collapse too? I hope not." (Dimitrova 2005)

Byzantium and its potential importance to the later development of Europe, or even its likeness to Europe, are issues often discussed and questioned in the novel. "No one speaks of Philippopolis [a former Byzantine town, nowadays Bulgarian Plovdiv] in Santa Varvara, New York, London, or Paris. This part of Europe has passed into the blind

spot of history. Why?" (167) Is this because of Orthodox Byzantium, which just let the crusaders through, to surpass the "Orthodox Empire by imposing the Catholic version of true faith" (167), or is it because of "the communist system that always thrived in Orthodox territories from Russia to Romania and from Bulgaria to Serbia?" (167)

Even Chrest-Jones is said to have been well aware of the supposed connection between Orthodoxy and communism, quoting a saying attributed to Dostoevsky: "The Orthodox Church fosters the nihilism that prefigures communism" (56). In Chrest-Jones' opinion, Europe is condemned because of its likeness to Byzantium. In his notes, he describes Europe as "too proud of itself and already in peril, too poor to play alone the role of global policeman; ready to make subtle compromises and fatal procrastinations, she is condemned" (116), just as Byzantium was. Stephanie's view is a different and more positive one, as she defines Byzantium not as a European territory, but as a European quality: "Byzantium is what remains most precious, refined, and painful about Europe, that which others envy about it and which she has difficulty realizing herself and extending –" (64).

However, at the end of the novel, Stephanie expresses a similar fear, as Kristeva does in the interview. Stephanie asks where she really is, only to find herself back in Paris, though her hometown now suffers from its likenesses with the novel's shaping of the global village, Santa Varvara, and with the historical Byzantine Empire: "I'm in Paris supposedly. [- - -] Three quarters of Paris has been invaded by Santa Varvara, the last quarter is slouching as Byzantium did before into an opulent museum culture, a mushy sandcastle civilization" (235).

By likening Europe to Byzantium, and by basing this likeness on their positions as borderlands between East and West – or, if preferred, between the Far East (Asia) and Far West (USA) – Kristeva emphasizes Europe's role as a borderland, which from a traditional Western Eurocentric perspective is quite unusual and provocative. Kristeva's somewhat rough allegorical interpretation in the interview is, however, challenged by the novel itself, by its many storylines and textual layers. *Murder in Byzantium* offers not only one, but several possible allegorical interpretations, all of them pointing to the complex relations between East and West, as well as between women and men, relations in which Byzantium, through its borderland position, repeat-

edly plays a crucial role. As we have seen, the novel combines several murder and love stories, opening within one another like Chinese boxes.

The first story, lying deepest within the novel, takes place in the historical Byzantium, as imagined by Chrest-Jones in the novel he writes on the life of Anna Comnena. The never-fulfilled erotic encounter between the crusader and Anna Comnena tells allegorically about a historical moment, when a possible uniting of the Byzantine East and the Latin West, here personified by the Byzantine princess and the Latin crusader, did *not* come to be. But it caused an immense loss, a grief which – according to Kristeva’s novel – is encapsulated in the work of Anna Comnena, in the *Alexiad*, together with Anna’s grief for her dead father and her own fate to never become empress.

The second story takes place in the ordinary life of Sebastian Chrest-Jones, and it tells about his strangling of his pregnant Chinese assistant and mistress. Allegorically, a male personifying the West’s Eastern, Byzantine legacy is here seen to murder the female Far East in order to avoid having a baby with her. But as we have seen, this murder prompts Chrest-Jones to set out after the other Eastern woman, the Byzantine one, the historical Anna Comnena, whom he also imagines to have been the love of his ancestor, the crusader.

The third story, which is placed at the beginning and the end of the novel, is that of the murderer called the Purifier, who has taken on the task of killing the members of a religious sect in Santa Varvara. But as the Purifier also turns out to be the twin brother of Chrest-Jones’ strangled Chinese assistant, he finally overtakes and kills Chrest-Jones in revenge for his sister’s death, as a purifying act. As mentioned earlier, this is done within the French church built in the Byzantine style in Le Puy-en-Velay, where Sebastian Chrest-Jones went after his Byzantine journey to Bulgaria. Eventually, these three stories are combined and get their final solution when the Purifier is shot and killed by Stephanie Delacour. This occurs immediately after the Purifier’s shot at Sebastian Chrest-Jones, still within the French Byzantine-style church. In this Byzantine framing in today’s France, the revenge of the male Far East on the male West has thus allegorically become real for a moment, before a woman – a Westerner identifying herself as a Byzantine – finally takes the command and wins.

This attempt to trace some of the narrative threads and their possible allegorical interpretations is still too rough-hewn to correspond to the novel's complexity, but it nevertheless points to the conclusion that in *Murder in Byzantium*, Byzantium's importance for Europe today is not a simple question of likeness, or of collapse. By the endless talking, thinking, reading and writing of the novel's protagonist, Stephanie Delacour, *Murder in Byzantium* as a whole becomes a demanding investigation of Byzantium and its role in Europe today, as well as of Europe's borderland role between the Far East and Far West in the global society.

### **"My own Byzantium" – transgressing space and time**

The phrase 'someone's Byzantium' – stated as "his Byzantium" or "my own Byzantium" – is recurrent in the novel. It is Stephanie who tells about this Byzantium of her own, and she emphasizes that it is not to be found in clichés, such as the shoe shiners, rugs and samovars of Constantinople admired by yesterday's tourists (83-84). Her Byzantium is couched in an invisible sublanguage: "My Byzantium [- -] is not the land of plenty that is popularly associated with this somewhat jarring name. My Byzantium resolutely names the unnameable or whatever it is that you wish not to reveal." (69) Stephanie's Byzantium is likened to intimacy, which "blossoms in the unsaid" and "speaks indirectly, transmuted into figures and parables, numbers, symbols, and allusions, and all that is Byzantine." (69) In French, the last word in this long enumeration of imagery and rhetorical figures is "byzantinismes" (2004: 121) – a word signifying unnecessarily unclear and sophisticated expressions and lengthy discussions. It is usually used in a derogatory and negative way, but here these "byzantinismes" are pointed out by Stephanie as a positive means of the art of speaking indirectly. Commissioner Rilsky, Stephanie's partner, takes a more indifferent stance, however. He doesn't go Byzantine himself, but sighs, "To each his own Byzantium. There are only imaginary Byzantiums." (2006: 82) Rilsky is also the one who uses the adjective 'Byzantine' in the usual, established derogatory way, to signify an odd behaviour, an exotic mix of names or an eccentric scholarship – "Byzantine it certainly was!" (48), "Byzantine indeed" (49).



Stephanie also emphasizes that Byzantium couldn't be found on the map: "Today Byzantium is nowhere; it is noplacé" (83). Her standpoint is somewhat contradicted by the design of the novel, which – almost as in a school book or a guide book – contains several maps of the crusaders' travels through the Byzantine Empire, as well as pictures of Orthodox churches and frescoes in Bulgaria. Yet Stephanie nevertheless explicitly tells us not to look for Byzantium on the map and says that her own Byzantium is "only a way of being styled after the colors of time" (86). To her, Byzantium is to be found in "passing epiphanies" (83), in the shifts of the sea, in glances, fragrances and tastes. She objects to the way Byzantium is traditionally described, as "a detective story" (note the author's irony), "a maze of legends and half-knowledge, a dead end with no way out" (84). Rather, she would characterize Byzantium in categories of time as a "future anterior" (83).

During his Byzantine journey, Chrest-Jones also inquires into the concept of time. He draws on the famous words of Augustine on time, quoting the suggestion that there are really three times called "the present of the past, the present of the present, the present of the future" (239). Reading Chrest-Jones' notes, Stephanie concludes that he "made his crusade in the present [- - -]. Chrest lived his memory like the very faculty of the present." (239)

As a historical empire, defined by its geographical borders, Byzantium disappeared long ago, but in Kristeva's novel it acquires new functions as the presence of Europe's future, which is described in one review as "an impossible (because still unacknowledged and unanticipated) future" (Margaroni 2007: 224). It functions also as a linguistic option, favouring the rhetorical possibility of speaking in parables and figures. Yet Byzantium is not treated in the novel as an imaginary or fantastic world, since it is also evoked in its specific historical capacities, with the help of years, maps, quotations and pictures of Orthodox churches and frescoes.

### **A Byzantium for women and strangers?**

In *Murder in Byzantium*, the notion of Byzantium is neatly tied to a feminine personality and identity. Byzantium is not only a word of feminine gender in French: "la Byzance". The Byzantine princess and historian Anna Comnena, the woman who never became the

sovereign of the Byzantine Empire, is also presented by Stephanie as "my Byzantium". Similar to the way Kristeva has described herself, Stephanie characterizes Anna Comnena as "a crossroads" (86), but also as an incarnation of Stephanie's own Byzantium: Anna Comnena was "a one-woman show" (86), "a shock of civilization, a clash of cultures, woman and man, weeper and warlord, singular and universal, unconsolated and proud, incommensurable. Anna, my Byzantium." (86) When Stephanie continues talking, Anna Comnena merges in a metonymical way with the Byzantine Empire, conceived of as female, and even with today's France: "Hers was the Occident turned Oriental, the most advanced of the eastern countries, the most sophisticated of the western ones – like France today." (86)

To this perception of Byzantium as female it should be added that Stephanie characterizes herself – although she is a Parisian reporter living in the third millennium – as a Byzantine, and she ties her Byzantine identity precisely to her capacities as a woman and a foreigner. In one of her long monologues, she says that she feels really at home only on airplanes, that she is "of the rootless race", "of the migrants of airports" (63). She resides in "the in-between", "in the emptiness that [she calls] strangeness" (63). She knows that she comes from Byzantium, which she describes as "a place that has never existed with any credible reality" except in her soul (64).

But in several places in *Murder in Byzantium*, the notion of Byzantium is found to hold opposite meanings, and the way Stephanie characterizes Byzantium, as the non-existing homeland for women and strangers, is confronted by the view of Chrest-Jones. Byzantium plays another role for his identity. When Chrest-Jones sets out for the Byzantine legacy of today's Bulgaria, it is not to confirm a postmodern feeling of rootlessness and strangeness, but to *find* his roots, his genetic origin. He is aware of the motive of his attraction to Byzantium and holds that his "Search for the Lost Father" (20) is essentially the same project as the one once conducted by Anna Comnena, when she wrote the *Alexiad*, while grieving the loss of her father (20). But Stephanie is able to find yet another motive for Chrest-Jones' journey and makes the diagnosis: "Sebastian Chrest-Jones was in love with Anna Comnena!" (111)

### Asking Byzantine questions

In *Murder in Byzantium*, the very capacity of calling things into question is defined as Byzantine. Stephanie, a reporter who identifies herself as a Byzantine, says that “the best Byzantines, like the best citizens of Santa Varvara, can be found among detectives, children and journalists” (65). The future will come from them, as they are “transitory beings”, “vulnerable Byzantines and recorders of the modern Crusaders”. The future will come from their articulation of the problems, from their asking of “Byzantine questions” (65).

In an earlier article, “Europe Divided: Politics, Ethics, Religion” (2000), Kristeva has emphasized the Western valorization of questioning as such. She notices its culmination in Kant’s “affirmation of a spontaneous, sovereign and in the sense liberatory understanding” (2000: 120) and traces it back to the Platonic dialogue and Augustine’s specification of the ego “as a putting in question” (2000: 120). The very same thought as formulated in the novel – its posing of “Byzantine questions” – thus seems to reinstate ‘the Byzantine’ right in the heart of Western European philosophy. Yet, elsewhere in the article, Kristeva traces and discusses the differences between Western philosophy and its Eastern, Orthodox counterparts. Although Orthodoxy constitutes an important part of Kristeva’s background and has offered her several terminological tools, her readers and interpreters have seldom been capable of picking up on and critically discussing her applications of terms borrowed from Byzantine culture and Orthodox theology (cf. the introduction to *Crisis of the European Subject*, where Kristeva’s extensive use of Orthodox theology and terminology in “Europe Divided” is ignored). The implications of Kristeva’s varying use of the Byzantine tradition in her literary works on the one hand, and her critical writing on the other, especially when it comes to the issue of questioning as such in the Byzantine and Western European traditions, thus appear to call for further study.

Back in Paris, when the cases are closed, after the sudden deaths of the two murderers, and after all her Byzantine inquiries, Stephanie eventually questions understanding as such: “Where is one when one is understanding? In history? Outside history?” (228) But this new case is closed very rapidly, when she promptly answers herself: Understanding is “another story” (228).

## **Conclusion**

*Murder in Byzantium*, a crime and detective novel, love story and modern palimpsest on Anna Comnena's *Alexiad*, does not speak of understanding, but of posing Byzantine questions, and as a literary work it reshapes and reformulates the traditional Western European view on Byzantium. As we have seen, this is done through a transgression of several conventional borders: in presenting a total novel, it violates the borders of narration; in focusing on strangers, travellers, migrants and crusaders, it challenges the borders of a fixed identity; in introducing a Byzantium of one's own, present not only in Orthodox Bulgaria but also in Paris, it rejects spatial, geographical borders; and in enacting the memory of Byzantium as the faculty of the present, it stretches the borders of a strict historical and chronological conception of time. Kristeva's novel thus shapes a Byzantium of great interest not only to Byzantinists, but also to the general public and an academic discussion of borders, origin, history and culture, i.e. to issues of crucial importance for Europe's role today in – or perhaps between – Eastern and Western cultures.

As Stephanie states in the novel, "my Byzantium is a matter of time, the very question that time asks itself when it doesn't want to choose between two places, two dogmas, two crises, two identities, two continents, two religions, two sexes, two plots. Byzantium leaves the question open and time as well." (88)

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